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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 001009

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: OPPOSITION GOVERNORS, MAYOR: A SNAPSHOT OF
VENEZUELA'S CRISIS

REF: A. A.) CARACAS 00809

[1B.](#) B.) CARACAS 00950

Classified By: Political Counselor Abelardo A. Arias for reason 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

[11.](#) (C) The violence that hit Venezuela February 27 to March 4 unmasked the radical bent of President Hugo Chavez's revolution, Caracas Mayor Alfredo Pena and Governors David De Lima (Anzoategui) and Luis Lippa (Apure) told the Ambassador March 16. They noted the influence of Cubans in the Venezuelan security forces institutionally and in De Lima's case, in the violence aimed at the opposition. The three also acknowledged the difficulties the opposition faces entering the regional elections, especially competing candidacies and possible government harassment using prosecutions. End Summary.

[12.](#) (U) The Ambassador hosted the most recent of his periodic dinners with Venezuelan Governors March 16. Caracas Mayor Alfredo Pena and Governors David De Lima (Anzoategui) and Luis Lippa (Apure) attended. The three Chavista governors regretted (no surprise there). The smaller group meant that Pena was more expansive than usual. PolCouns and Conoff accompanied Ambassador.

Demonstrations February 27-March 4

[13.](#) (C) The Ambassador asked about their perspective of the demonstrations that occurred February 27-March 4. The three guests said they believed that the disturbances revealed the radical bent of President Hugo Chavez's revolution. Lippa said Apure had been relatively quiet during those days. The governor attributed this to his having coordinated with the local National Guard commander. One anomaly, Lippa noted, was that some of the National Guard troops he encountered on duty did not appear to be from Apure. He confirmed that the government had had to move troops around the country to cover needs, and a contingent had been sent from Apure to Caracas.

[14.](#) (C) De Lima said the GoV had not moved troops from Anzoategui because they had been needed there. The state is too much of a problem for Chavez, De Lima said. The greatest problem in Anzoategui had been the government's use of armed civilians against demonstrators (ref A), the governor asserted. He said the Anzoategui police has identified 470 members of these armed groups. They receive weapons and tactical training from Cubans, De Lima asserted. He also charged that the Cubans lead some of the groups which attacked middle-class neighborhoods in Anzoategui cities (not further specified).

[15.](#) (C) Metropolitan Caracas Mayor Pena recounted that prior to the February 27 opposition March, the Minister of Interior had asked him to contribute Metropolitan police forces to help control the demonstrators if needed. Pena said he refused because, under the GoV plan, the MP would have formed the first line of confrontation. He had issued the permit for the march to end at Plaza Morales, so how, he asked, could he use his own police to stop the march short of that goal? He told the group that the GoV had wanted to repeat an April 2002 scenario so that when violence erupted, the Metropolitan Police would be blamed for deaths. Pena said he instead chose to deploy the Metropolitan Police along the march route to protect the opposition demonstrators.

Revolutionary Commitment

[16.](#) (C) De Lima and Lippa commented on the changes in attitude they had witnessed in Venezuela's authorities. De Lima illustrated recounting an incident which occurred when his daughter was stopped by National Guardsmen while driving

with a friend in early March. Anzoategui State police attempted to resolve the matter, but could not. The Governor went to the location to intervene, and after some verbal wrangling, which the Governor said he exploited because a friendly crowd had gathered, he attempted to move the vehicle himself. The Guardsmen reacted by aiming their loaded weapons at him, and reiterating that only on orders from their General would they let him pass. De Lima said he was impressed by their animosity, contempt for him and their overt commitment to Chavez's revolution. Both he and Lippa commented that the new attitude is the result of Cuban training aimed at making the first and second lieutenants identify "with the process."

Opposition Unity and Regional Elections

17. (C) Opposition governors are now meeting regularly, the three reported. The principal topics for the week's meeting, they said, was what to do about competing opposition candidacies as the deadline for filing (March 23) approaches.

The three concurred that the biggest concern was the possible impact of going into the races with various candidates for an individual position. Lippa noted that his old party, Democratic Action (AD), continued to function as in the past, attempting to control candidacies from Caracas. He said, for example, they were still supporting candidacies of persons with little popular support, including his rival in Apure, because of their history with the party. The three also concurred that the opposition eventually would come to agreement on the majority of the candidacies. (Note: AD has, in fact, inscribed a candidate in Apure to run against Lippa and the MVR candidate.)

18. (C) Lippa noted that another obstacle the opposition faces in proceeding with the candidacies for the regional elections is GoV intimidation using the threat of criminal charges. (On March 15, Caracas newspapers reported that that the Comptroller's Office had begun investigations into alleged malfeasance by Lippa, Pena and a number of other elected opposition officials.) As they discussed the issue, Pena received a call advising him that a detention order had been issued for Baruta Mayor Henrique Capriles (ref B). The three asserted that the GoV's intent was to disqualify them legally, and politically.

COMMENT

19. (C) The news of the opposition governors meeting regularly, and having a forum where to discuss relevant issues, is welcome. The need for such a mechanism had been among the topics of discussion in earlier governors' dinners with us. The focus on the on the violence during the demonstrations on this occasion reflected how the theme dominated discussions among Venezuelans in the wake of events that have left more than a dozen dead, numerous injured and detained, and a black mark on the GoV's human record.

110. (C) The opposition governors and mayors are, in fact, important factors in resisting President Chavez's ideas for controlling all Venezuelan institutions. It is difficult to imagine what Venezuela would be like today if mayors and governors were still appointed, as was the case prior to 1989. We are adjusting our AID and PAS activities to put more emphasis on federalism and decentralization.

SHAPIRO

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